Lateral

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Review of *Death's Futurity: The Visual Life of Black Power* by Sampada Aranke (Duke University Press)

by Jenna M. Wilson | Book Reviews, Issue 13.1 (Spring 2024)

ABSTRACT Sampada Aranke's *Death's Futurity: The Visual Life of Black Power* begins by insisting on the importance of visual culture to the Black Panther Party's platform before exploring the Party's use of political posters, flyers, magazine covers, a documentary, and other ephemera to mobilize community members in the wake of the state's murder of Bobby Hutton, Fred Hampton, and George Jackson. In doing so, Aranke argues that the BPP "transformed these state-sanctioned murders into opportunities to engage political action" (2). Cautiously navigating the speculative and often violent nature of the archive when it comes to Black life and death, Aranke draws on the work of theorists like Saidiya Hartman and Christina Sharpe to balance storytelling with first-person narratives, archival coverage, and political theory from the era. Throughout, Aranke centers the importance of fugitivity and futurity to the Black Panther Party, which suggests a deep connection between the Black power movement and the prison abolition movement. Indeed, toward the end of *Death's Futurity,* Aranke argues that these "spectacularized murders mark a transition from Black Power to prison abolition." While I hoped for a more robust discussion of the transition between these intimately linked movements, Aranke's *Death's Futurity* nonetheless offers a critical exploration of the use of visual culture in revolutionary movements.

KEYWORDS Black Panther Party, Black Power, politicized looking, social movements, visual culture

Death's Futurity: The Visual Life of Black Power. By Sampada Aranke. Durham, NC and London, UK: Duke University Press, 2023, 186 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-1-4780-1930-5. US List: $25.95.

In *Death's Futurity: The Visual Life of Black Power*, Sampada Aranke engages with a set of ephemera that circulated following the state's murder of three prominent Black Panther Party (BPP) members in the 1960s and 1970s. These particular cultural objects spoke to the BPP's commitment to "the production of radical Black visual culture aimed toward revolution and liberation" (2). The BPP created a recognizable and lasting aesthetic that aided in the Party's growth by naming Emory Douglas the Minister of Culture in 1967. Notably, the cultural productions put forward by the BPP countered the state and mainstream media's portrayal of the BPP and Black people more generally.

Taking the centrality of visual culture to the Party's platform as her point of departure, Aranke explores how some of the cultural imagery released in the wake of the murders of Bobby Hutton, Fred Hampton, and George Jackson memorialized and mobilized party members, while "call[ing] attention to both the political conditions and political uses of . . . death" (21). In doing so, Aranke argues that the BPP "transformed these state-sanctioned murders into opportunities to engage political action" (2). Knowing that they were the target of intense and violent state repression, the BPP responded to these killings with calls to action that furthered their appeal for armed self-defense, expanded their base, and upset state narratives. To close, Aranke argues that these "spectacularized murders mark a transition from Black Power to prison abolition," two movements that are inextricably linked (2).

While *Death's Futurity* centers a sensitive and perhaps provocative claim, Aranke approaches this claim with care and a commitment to radical ethics, openly discussing her archival methods, her decisions around what imagery to include, and how she intends to avoid reproducing harm or spectacularizing Black death. While I hoped for a more robust discussion of the transition from Black Power to prison abolition, which was saved for the final pages of the book, Aranke's *Death's Futurity* is a crucial read for those interested in how visual culture mediates revolutionary movements. In what follows, I will explore a few of the key themes

Aranke discusses throughout the book, focusing particularly on her methodology and the centrality of fugitivity and futurity to her argument and to the Black Panther Party's platform.

Throughout *Death's Futurity*, Aranke carefully explores the specificity of Hutton, Hampton, and Jackson's murders while considering how each case is related and indicative of the historical prevalence of extra-legal and legal anti-Black violence. The author's thoughtful approach to the archive is one of the major strengths of the book. Tending to the ways in which Black life and death have been systematically excluded and erased from institutional archives, Aranke turns to thinkers like Saidiya Hartman and Christina Sharpe to move "against the grain of proper archives" (24) and balances "storytelling with first-person narratives, archival coverage, and political theory from the era" (19). With acute attention to the speculative nature of this work, Aranke's methods resist finitude while addressing how the lack of eyewitness accounts and visual evidence "show[s] the ease with which state findings take shape and remain uncontested or unchanged" (31).

As she explores political posters, flyers, magazine covers, a documentary, and other ephemera that surrounded the deaths of Hutton, Hampton, and Jackson, Aranke engages with what she calls "politicized looking" (15). Politicized looking can be understood as a mode of looking that "encourage[s] an activation of context" and has the capacity to politicize and move the looker toward action (16). In this case, the looker refuses and contests state narratives, and instead, "is invited to slow down the process of image consumption in order to see the conditions through which life, and in this case death, occurs at an uneven, disjunctive, and violent level against Black people" (86).

Central to the imagery that surrounds these three deaths is a commitment to radical Black collective futures. As Aranke notes, the base of the BPP was between sixteen and twenty-four years old, and the Party acknowledged, in the

words of co-founder Huey Newton, that "the revolution has always been in the hands of the young" (17). With their collective futurity in mind, the BPP "worked toward living a Black future in their present" (18) while simultaneously keeping their sights set on a future "horizon line" (52), as Aranke names it, that was not yet (and still is not) realized.

Throughout the book—though most extensively in the final chapter focusing on the murder of political prisoner Jackson—Aranke considers fugitivity as a generative framework and political organizer. Aranke discusses some of Jackson's key theoretical frameworks that position criminality as intimately linked to Blackness in the context of the United States. In this way, as Aranke writes, "capitalism, and its (extra)legal collaborator the state, makes it impossible for Black subjects to be anything other than fugitives" (93). The tie between fugitivity and Blackness "gestures toward an understanding of Blackness still locked in antagonistic tension between the state and any notion of freedom" (111), such that unlinking criminality from Blackness requires "the total destruction of the existing social order" (100). The fugitive imaginaries that the Party mobilized in the 1960s and 1970s "open up the condition of possibility of thinking Black freedom," which is to say that the BPP's insistence on the value of Black life certainly *did* represent a threat to state legitimacy in that the image of Black freedom was incompatible with US white supremacist state logics (112).

While I was generally impressed by Aranke's astute attention to the ethics surrounding the imagery of Black radical deaths, as well as her intentional discussion of the limits and problematics of the archive, some of the language around the necessity and generative nature of the state-sanctioned murders of Black radicals gave me pause. For example, when Aranke discusses Newton's public letter following the murder of Hutton, she argues that Newton "pragmatically approach[es] Hutton's murder as a necessary sacrifice in the plight of revolutionary violence" (46), and later, that "Newton articulates Hutton's murder as a timely event in the service of revolution" (47). While I appreciate the

capacity of the BPP to mobilize and organize in the wake of such devastating loss, I am certainly wary of the framing of Black radical death as *necessary* for revolutionary futures. While it is clear that many BPP leaders recognized that their radical consciousness made them particularly vulnerable to the state's repressive arm—as evidenced by Hampton's timely prediction of his own assassination—the nuance between the Party thriving *in spite* of the state's best efforts toward neutralization and their thriving *because* of it is important.

My caution around these ideas is also informed by current contexts of anti-Black violence in the US. Following the conviction of Derek Chauvin for the murder of George Floyd, for example, Nancy Pelosi thanked Floyd for "sacrificing [his] life for justice."[1] Of course, unlike Hutton, Hampton, and Jackson, Floyd was not a member of the BPP or, at least to my knowledge, engaged with radical politics that challenged the US state. Certainly, the impact of this statement is different when it comes from the white Speaker of the House rather than fellow BPP members who are thanking their brothers for their sacrifice to the revolution. However, while Hutton, Hampton, and Jackson were committed to radical futures and seemingly understood that their revolutionary aims made them targets of state repression, framing their murders as necessary for Black collective freedom makes their deaths seem inevitable, rather than moments in which state agents made cognizant choices to eliminate people that they viewed as threats to white supremacist capitalism.

Overall, *Death's Futurity* is an important contribution to the field of visual cultural studies, and it does an excellent job signaling the importance of cultural productions to the aims and actions of the Black Panther Party. Thoughtfully tending to ethical questions of the archive and imagery of Black radical deaths, Aranke's *Death's Futurity* centers the generative politics of fugitivity and futurity while directing readers to the importance of "politicized looking" to turn state-sanctioned violence and repression into galvanizing moments of political action.

Notes

1. Kristin Wilson, Daniella Diaz, and Annie Grayer, “Pelosi Tweets New Response to Chauvin Verdict after Thanking George Floyd ‘for Sacrificing Your Life for Justice,’” *CNN*, April 20, 2021, https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/20/politics/nancy-pelosi-george-floyd-reaction/index.html < https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/20/politics/nancy-pelosi-george-floyd-reaction/index.html> .

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